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SUBJECT: OPPOSITION DECRIES MEDIA BIAS, SUPPORTS LEADER -
FOR NOW

REF: A. 07 NASSAU 1196
[1](#)B. 08 NASSAU 146
[1](#)C. 08 NASSAU 56
[1](#)D. 08 NASSAU 294
[1](#)E. NASSAU 13
[1](#)F. NASSAU 63
[1](#)G. NASSAU 62
[1](#)H. NASSAU 73

Classified By: Classified by Charge Zuniga-Brown for reasons 1.4(b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY: Fallout from the alleged Travolta extortion case has sparked a new round of media commentary and speculation about the prospects of the opposition Progressive Liberal Party (PLP) and its longtime leader Perry Christie. PLP officials uniformly accuse the media of pro-government bias. With several opposition leaders tarnished by the scandal, Christie has emerged strengthened as a unifying force, despite what most see as his lackluster performance in government and opposition. While both leading parties are likely to face leadership successions before the next polls, the PLP,s dilemma is more acute given its surprise election loss in May 2007 and a series of subsequent setbacks. Facing a demoralized and disorganized opposition, meanwhile, the governing Free National Movement (FNM) is secure in power and able to concentrate on major policy challenges. END SUMMARY.

BACKGROUND: PLP,s BAD STRETCH

[1](#)2. (C) The last two years have not been good to the opposition Progressive Liberal Party (PLP). The scandal-prone PLP unexpectedly lost the May 2007 elections to the Free National Movement (FNM) amid plausible charges of ineptitude and corruption (ref A). Unable to come to terms with defeat, the party pursued three separate election court challenges in a bid to reverse the poll results, losing two cases and abandoning the third in 2008. The first court decision went against the PLP in another way: the judgment stoked suspicions that the PLP sought to manipulate the election process to its own advantage through last-minute gerrymandering of constituency boundaries, in a bungled attempt that saw them lose the elections instead (ref B).

[1](#)3. (C) Before the judicial nails were even hammered into the PLP strategy,s coffin, a youngish PLP Member of Parliament, Kenyatta Gibson, quit the party, declared his independence, and denounced long-serving PLP leader Perry Christie (ref C). The acrimonious and very public exchange of insults in January 2008 upset the PLP leadership,s political calculus and strengthened the FNM's effective parliamentary majority while PLP election challenges were still pending before the courts, rendering them essentially meaningless. Gibson,s vociferous criticism of Christie in the press distracted and embarrassed the opposition at a very sensitive juncture and re-opened post-election debates about the party leader,s responsibility for the defeat at the polls.

CHRISTIE,S CREDENTIALS QUESTIONED,
BUT UPHELD) SO FAR

14. (C) The series of post-election setbacks raised further doubts about Christie,s leadership capacity and judgment, whether in choosing his friends and candidates or charting a course for the party as a whole. Many observers inside and outside the PLP questioned his fitness for the top job. Yet months of post-election recriminations and debates -- about the need for an honest analysis of the reasons for the PLP,s defeat or the prospects for a leadership succession -- came to naught in February 2008, when the PLP held an anti-climactic party convention at which Christie,s leadership went unchallenged. Party elders apparently judged that it was the wrong time to launch a leadership debate. The convention was historic, nevertheless, for seeing the election of the first female Chairman of the PLP, Glennys Hanna-Martin, daughter of the current Governor General and PLP stalwart, Arthur Dion Hanna.

15. (C) Speculation over primacy in the PLP gradually died down as all eyes turned to the economy. The U.S. sub-prime mortgage meltdown and credit crunch offered an opening for the opposition to attack the government,s handling of major investment decisions, especially after the 2.6 billion dollar Baha Mar development in Nassau,s Cable Beach stalled in March 2008 (ref D). Foreign-financed development stopped in its tracks by the end of the year as a full-blown financial hurricane hit the U.S. in September 2008, with the impact on tourism and employment felt almost immediately through large-scale job-cuts in the hotel sector (ref E). In the second half of 2008, as the economic storm gathered steam,

PLP leaders seemed to rally. They increasingly directed their criticisms at the party in power,s handling of the growing economic crisis, rising unemployment, and hardship among ordinary people.

TRAVOLTA SCANDAL DERAILS PARTY (

16. (C) Then news of the alleged extortion plot targeting the Travolta family broke in mid-January 2009 (ref F), wrecking havoc on the PLP in The Bahamas, second city, Freeport. Accused Senator Pleasant Bridgewater (n.b. the unsuccessful plaintiff in the second, failed election court case) resigned her appointed post even before her indictment for abetting extortion. The scandal has also compromised) most analysts outside the PLP feel, irreparably) the future leadership credentials of top Christie rival, lone PLP Grand Bahama MP, and ex-Tourism Minister Obie Wilchcombe (who is, unluckily, also Bridgewater,s business partner). Fallout may yet ensnare Allyson Maynard-Gibson, former Attorney General and Travolta family lawyer, in further intraparty intrigue. While damage from the indictments is still being assessed, the PLP is clearly weakened and once again distracted with talk of scandal and internal rivalries.

(REVIVES LEADERSHIP RUMORS

17. (C) The succession rumors have now resumed in full force, well in advance of the PLP,s anticipated November 2009 convention. At least a half-dozen old-guard members and a number of up-and-coming outsiders are thought to harbor ambitions. Several make all analysts, short lists of future PLP leaders, in addition to the now discredited Wilchcombe and Hanna-Martin, who is considered a long-shot. The usual favorite is Bernard Nottage, leader of opposition business in parliament, once co-leader of the PLP, and Christie,s perennial rival for the top post. Alfred Sears, former Attorney General, is another party old-timer who gets good odds. Unlike the previous two, Philip & Brave8 Davis, a parliamentarian and partner in Christie,s law firm, has recently made his leadership ambitions public. The talkative and media-savvy ex-Foreign Minister Fred Mitchell is disqualified by many for reasons unrelated to his political

skills. (He is unmarried and rumored to be gay, a non-starter in the extremely socially conservative Bahamas.) But he is &constantly campaigning⁸, in the words of one pro-government political analyst, and has perhaps the highest public profile of any PLP official. Frank Smith is another politician regarded as a long-shot as a relatively young, junior MP in a field still dominated by the party old guard. He is married to the daughter of a major PLP financier, a fact which a political reporter for a major daily see as his greatest and perhaps only asset in the contest.

PLP OFFICIALS SLAM MEDIA BIAS

¶8. (C) As media and political commentators once again rake over last year,s speculative coals in the aftermath of the latest high-profile PLP scandal, opposition leaders at all levels are crying foul. PLP officials uniformly and energetically accuse the main newspapers, including a gossip-mongering tabloid rag, of pro-government bias. In meetings with EmbOfs, ranking PLP leaders, including Mitchell and Smith, took the media to task for focusing so much attention on the timing of an anticipated succession struggle instead of highlighting the government,s poor record of economic management. At the same time, they were tight-lipped on the issue of leadership succession. Meanwhile press leaks, which apparently reveal the inner workings of the party hierarchy to a national audience, continue to multiply and suggest that factionalism is alive and well.

¶9. (C) Just as PLP officials allege, the party,s detractors are taking no end of public delight in the PLP,s political woes. By all accounts, PLP stalwarts are just as surely repositioning themselves behind-the-scenes in light of new political realities, at the expense of a crafting a clear alternative to FNM policies. The PLP has lost its public footing once again and squandered the opening provided by unflattering reviews by Standard and Poor,s of the FNM,s economic performance and &loss of momentum⁸ in foreign investment (ref G). Mitchell and Smith appeared unconcerned, oddly enough, in recent talks with EmbOfs about the effects on their constituents of the current economic fallout, which seems to provide the clearest opening for the PLP,s return to power at the next elections.

CHRISTIE STRENGTHENED AS UNIFIER

¶10. (C) Some media commentators initially thought that the extortion scandal would fatally undermine Perry Christie, who has presided over the PLP for a decade. Analysts agree that Christie cannot feel secure as party leader in the long term.

Even a very junior PLP youth official privately cited Christie,s sub-par performance and tolerance of indiscipline as factors in their 2007 election defeat, showing how ingrained and widespread such attitudes have become not only in the wider public, but inside the PLP itself. Yet Christie,s leadership position now actually seems strengthened, as he can plausibly claim to be the only unifying force on the scene.

¶11. (C) Most leading PLPs are conspicuously silent or are following Christie,s lead in public statements calling for party unity in the face of internal upheaval and external media attacks. The disgraced Wilchcombe, for example, has reemphasized his professed allegiance to Christie and echoed the party leader,s unity call. Other leading PLPs seem to recognize that, though theirs is a battered machine in need of retooling, now is not the time to look under the hood) let alone change the driver. The very factionalism that weakens the PLP as a coherent opposition force, ironically, may now serve to shore up his position at the top of the party as it pulls together to face threats from the outside.

NO STRONG CONTENDERS AS ELECTIONS FAR OFF

¶12. (C) There is no indication, for the moment, that any PLP politician wishes to mount an open challenge to Christie, especially in the present stormy conditions. It is not clear, perhaps more importantly, whether any one leader commands sufficient support within the party leadership, the rank-and-file, or among party financiers to unseat Christie in a contested race. The leader of the PLP,s youth wing suggested privately to EmbOffs that the contest for the deputy leader position at the next party convention may well serve as the first act in the transition at the top, with the winner taking the mantle of party leader from Christie at a later date.

¶13. (C) Through it all, the stolid FNM is firmly in charge and shows it through an ambitious legislative agenda, on the one hand, and several high-profile public sector reform and personnel house-cleaning efforts on the other (ref H). These may be criticized by PLP partisans, but they are embraced by the people who are tired of the poor service and corruption that in the minds of many is inextricably linked with the PLP,s last term in office. Facing a demoralized and disorganized opposition, the FNM can concentrate its energies on the major challenges facing the country) the economy, illegal immigration, crime) without distractions or hard questions about its own future leadership succession.

COMMENT

¶14. (C) Change at the top is still worse than the status quo for the PLP as long as national elections remain a distant prospect. The PLP,s internal turmoil is likely to remain protracted, semi-public, and indecisive, with the existing rivalries simmering below the surface at least until the next party convention. If the deputy leader position is contested later this year, which is likely given the incumbent,s signaled retirement plans, this would provide an immediate outlet for the ambitions of some of Christie,s rivals, and perhaps set them up for a bid at the top spot later on. A controlled fight over the deputy leader job would also extend Christie,s tenure as leader for another year or more and yet could prepare the stage for a transition at the top. With elections unlikely before 2012, plenty of time remains for any potential outcome to be engineered, as is most likely, in advance of the next campaign. For that reason, perhaps, the best potential Christie rivals will continue to keep their cards close to their chests. In the meantime, a show of PLP unity is a high priority in order to portray some semblance of discipline and order as the extortion charges wind their way through the courts.
ZUNIGA-BROWN